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ABSTRACT

Realism is a continuing trend in adolescent literature. Sixteen new books for teenagers--one nonfiction book about death; five novels dealing with the themes of parents' divorce and remarriage, self-identity, old age, and passive acceptance of life; two "how-to" books on fishing and candlemaking; and eight anthologies of poetry dealing with realistic themes--can help teachers fulfill their responsibility to help students understand reality. (MKM)

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"Literature for the Adolescent Reader - An Explosion of Reality"

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The title of this speech is "Literature for the Adolescent Reader - An Explosion of Reality." In looking at the word explosion we may, at first glance, think of it in a negative fashion.

One of the definitions attributed by The Random House Dictionary to the word explosion is that of "bursting with noise." Indeed, what has been happening in the field of literature for the adolescent reader is indeed a series of books that have certainly elicited from many individuals "noise"! And much of this noise is good, healthy noise - the kind that is made after critical reading and thinking has taken place.

This morning I would like to share with you some thoughts on some of the most recently published books that have made "noise" these past few months. I shall only discuss hard bound editions of recent books, as my talk this afternoon at 1:30 in Demonstration Room I will deal specifically on paperbacks for the adolescent reader. All of the books mentioned are listed on the bibliography which was handed to you as you came in.

On November 10, 1974 the Newark Star Ledger, Newark, New Jersey ran an article on the fact that teenagers suffer from acute hypochondria. With a lot of young people today a pain or ache may be indicative of an imaginary illness,

but for others the pain is real, the disease acute, and the fact of death inevitable.

Doris Lund has written the account of her own son's dying years - dying because of acute leukemia. ERIC is a book just published by Lippincott, and is a book that challenges all of its readers to truly face life and to live every moment of it with vitality and purposefulness. When Eric was told that he had six months to two years to live, he defied every word of it. Instead of waiting for death he reached out to life and found new meaning as he played varsity soccer, ran ten or twenty miles a day and shared his love with a girl who gave joy to his being. I closed the last page with more than a lump in my throat - as the book causes all to look at their daily activities and wonder at their worth, if any. This book has been selected by the Reader's Digest Condensed Book Club and is an alternate selection for the Book-of-the-Month Club and Psychology Today Book Club.

Rosemary Wells has long been associated with picture books for young children. You will be surprised and delighted as you read her contribution to the world of literature for the adolescent reader which is entitled, None of the Above. Published October, 1974 this book deals with Marcia Mill and her new life in a family

augmented by the recent remarriage of her father. Her new family is one of ambition, goal-setting and attainment. Even having no goals for herself as she plods through high school, Marcia finds that her new stepmother has an interesting way of imposing her purpose for living on Marcia. Marcia's new mother has a definite opinion of what needs to be done with Marcia as she expresses early in the book, "I'm doing the best I can with Marcia. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. Not overnight anyway."

The pressure became great enough for Marcia to give in, and surprisingly she found that she could succeed in a heretofore unknown world. But with this new-found success comes confusion - confusion as to where she really does have her identity.

It was when Marcia was taking the Scholastic Aptitude Examinations that she looked at the question on the "attempted raid on Bolivian headquarters would not have occurred had the Spanish been informed of the lack of . . . . this was it - it was time for the fourth response - "D" - "none of the above."

That moment appears to be so symbolic of what many of our adolescents are facing today. Many times there appear to be choices for them - choices that appear reasonable to the adult offering them, but to the adolescent, upon viewing all

the possible alternatives they too are left with their own decision, one which says. "none of the above."

Marcia wins admittance into her new world in a grand manner. Her outstanding academic status by the end of her senior year won her a letter of acceptance into the freshman class at Sarah Lawrence College. But does she really want that challenge - even Marcia is unsure as she slips Raymond's diamond on her hand and runs out into the night.

This novel is powerful, probing into some aspects of adolescent development not often mentioned but aspects of life and love that are indeed realistic experiences for many of our youths today.

An oft-neglected field of literature for the adolescent reader is that of poetry. Two books published in 1974 that contain poems relative to the interests of teenage readers are edited by John Rowe Townsend and David Kherdian.

Townsend's book is entitled, Modern Poetry illustrated with photographs by Barbara Pfeffer. This book contains a selection of more than one hundred thirty-five poems by modern English and American poets. This book has wide appeal for these poems are a reflection of the world in the four decades beginning in the thirties and spanning the sixties. Mr. Townsend's selections are direct for he has chosen poems which are active, reflecting his own

belief that poems are to be enjoyed, not endured. The photographs are superb - a true compliment to the book.

Kherdian's book is uniquely edited in that he has selected fourteen American poets, and explores their roots as well as their ethnic identity. The poetry is not only urgent and powerful, but is further enhanced by the fact that there are biographical sketches of each of the contributors as well as personal statements made by each contributor. These sketches personalize the poems causing them to mean far more to the reader than they would otherwise. Any library collection would indeed by enhanced by adding these two books.

To these two books allow me to add six additional books of poetry that would be most welcome in any collection of books designed for the adolescent reader.

The first one is edited by Arnold Adoff entitled, The Poetry of Black America; Anthology of the 20th Century. This anthology includes works of major and minor poets and includes a number of works by such poets as Langston Hughes, Robert Hayden, Countee Cullen and Nikki Giovanni.

Nikki Giovanni has selected from her own poetry those poems that she deems most appropriate for young people in her book entitled, Ego - Tripping and Other Poems for Young People. Another author who has selected her own poetry for

a stress on the here and now is Eve Merriam in her book, Out Loud. It is here that I wish to mention the book of poetry edited by Alice Walker entitled, Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems. Many of these poems, like those of Giovanni are reflections of life and blackness.

Countee Cullen has edited an anthology of verse by Negro poets. It is entitled, Caroling Dusk and is published by Harper and Row. Originally compiled for publication in 1927, it has been reissued for publication this year. The contents are timeless, for they speak not only to what it means to be a Negro, but to be human.

The synthetic, that is so encompassing in our everyday lives, was the reason for the compilation of the book of poems entitled, To See the World Afresh. The authors hope that with the selections in this book the reader will see the genuine, the real. It is designed for the young people of the seventies and with all that is false, it would be an asset to have this book on our library shelves.

I would also like to call to your attention the Athenaum Instructional Series. This series is designed for all, with photographs to clarify detailed points made in the text. There is no assumption on the part of the authors and therefore everything is clearly explained. John Fabian's book, Fishing for Beginners is but one book in this series of which you will want to be aware.

Speaking of doing things look for Carol Feder's book entitled, The Candlemaking Design Book. Using equipment that is basically around the house this book clearly explains the process of making candles adding a list of "problems and precautions."

When thinking of things to do, I cannot ignore the fact that there are a great many suggestions in Robert Cormier's book, The Chocolate War.

I cannot deny the fact that The Chocolate War is an excellent book for critical reading, critical thinking and succeeding discussions. The impact of the book is a disturbing one, and needs to be discussed by all who read it. The danger as I see it, is in the possibility of not discussing it. The characterization is not a deep one, but it is accurate and clearly definitive. It makes the reader think about his or her own source of identification, and where, if any, one's place is in the power struggle of society at large, or the immediate struggle for identity within one's own peer group.

Dare I disturb the universe? was Jerry Renault's question. It is also the question of many of our adolescents today. The book removes any hope of answering this question in a positive manner. But in reality it is possible to disturb the universe. It doesn't always end up with emotional

and/or physical scars. The Chocolate War seems to be saying don't bother, kid - it won't work unless you have the clout of Archie Costello to manipulate and control the adult generation that wants to dictate to you your every move. There is no hint in this book of any of the positive, constructive causes that have been started or brought to successful beneficial completion because someone dared to disturb already existing circumstances. It is a distressing thing to look over the entire selection of books for adolescents and have anyone single this one out for recognition as an absolute purchase for schools and public libraries.

Have we no sense of responsibility in what books we, offer our teenage readers? At a time when the future citizens of our country are forming values, setting future goals for themselves and establishing relationships that are crucial to their maturity, have we the right to give them any book that dares to tear down the very heart of what we want them to have faith and confidence in? What would be the reaction of a Jerry Renault after reading this book? Have we created more Archie Costellos because of this book? Is that what we want?

The Chocolate War is saying there is no hope in resisting evil. It is a book that may prove for many to be

a catalyst toward actions not only toward others but within the heart and mind of the reader.

It appears that we need to do more in weighing what is read with our students to elevate their level of critical reading. Many of our students are not weighing and testing what is read - they are merely accepting it because it is there in print. There is a danger here in treating any book as an entirety and not as a means of communication.

It is interesting to note that in my own conversations with young adults I find them thinking very much along the line that if a book is given to them in a hardback edition they tend to regard this as truth, whereas, when a book is given to them in paperback form they, more often than not, regard it as recreational reading, not to be read with the same seriousness that the hard bound edition was.

The world of literature for the adolescent reader has indeed been enriched by two very gifted writers, Harry Mazer and his wife Norma Fox Mazer. You'll recall Norma Fox Mazer for her book, I, Trissy. In this book Trissy gradually accepts her parents' divorce. But Norma's most recent book, which was a National Book Award finalist for 1974 is the one with which you are probably more familiar. That is, A Figure of Speech. Here we have a gripping story of Jenny's love for her grandfather, an individual whom she

regards as a person not as "a figure of speech." The problems of being old are poignantly discussed as well as the people who are affected by those that are aging.

Harry Mazer's novels include Guy Lenny which was published in 1971. An open-ended story it eliminates any pat answers to life although the grownups are sure 'everything will work out perfectly.' Harry's second book is one of survival - the kind that comes with being caught physically in a snowstorm but even more than that is an inner survival of recognizing the dependence that we have on each other. The theme of survival is a very basic part of not only Harry's books but his life. During World War II he was a waist gunner on a B-17 and had the terrifying experience of being shot down and captured by the Germans.

Harry's latest book, Dollar Man is one which is not only charged with superb characterization but intertwines themes typical of the age reader for whom it is designed. Delacorte Press, the publishers list this as being grades 7 and up.

Marcus Rosenbloom is a fourteen-year-old fat teenager. His need for identity is great - so great that acceptance becomes an all-consuming passion. Even greater than that is that fact that Marcus is an illegitimate child who wants desperately to find his father. Sally, his mother is the height of a liberated woman and is insistent on giving no hints as to who is Marcus' father.

Marcus pleads in a last resort to Sally's mother, "Grandma, I'm old enough to know things. I'm not a baby. I don't need Sally's permission for everything. Please, Grandma."

Marcus does have a father - one very real in his own mind as being one that is a hero, a secret government agent who is a benevolent "dollar man" giving help to those in need.

Marcus is successful, but in gaining success and confronting his father he learns more about himself, his own value system and what is really important to him.

Harry Mazer has combined elements in this novel that truly make it one of the most outstanding books published in 1974. I am sure that this is one book you will find on lists of award winning books for 1974 - and more than just on lists, you will find it in the hands of adolescent readers as well.

The world of 1974 is indeed different from that of the past. Three centuries ago the young adult was fully absorbed into the life of the community. There was no false protection from birth, death, pain and sexuality. Life began and ended in the immediate area of the child's awareness, at home where, the young were brought into the world and the old lived until death released them from suffering.

Are our young people today actually withdrawn from the adult world, or in actuality do we exclude them? Exclusion that comes not only through activities but also reading matter.

" . . . an explosion of reality" is the phrase I used to introduce this speech. Our responsibility in helping our youth understand reality is one that lasts right up to maturity. The distinctions between adolescents and adults are clarified as we look at what dominates adolescent behavior - acceptance by their peers, to be loved by someone of the opposite sex, and to appear experienced and worldly. Many of these needs are not met in their existing real-life world and so we can offer to them vicarious experiences that can aid in their process of gaining maturity. We, as adults, must be extremely conscious that we do not lose sight of the fact that teenagers can handle information once it is available to them.

The plea of teenagers to us is not one of wanting to be left in isolation, but rather a search for identity that requires understanding and patience.

The need for communication is intense, for both adolescent and parent alike. I think the magnitude of this need was demonstrated in The New York Times on Sunday,

May 12, 1974. There, in the bottom right hand corner of the front page was the following:

> PAUL, WE ARE VERY WORRIED. We love you and understand. Please phone or write. Mom, Dad, Bingo.